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SUBJECT: KARS AND IGDIR: AS WINTER RETREATS, EYES ON ARMENIA

REF: ANKARA 689

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: On the far northeastern reaches of Turkey lie the two mountainous provinces of Kars and Igdir. Imposing snow-covered mountains surround patches of dark green pastures newly emerged from the freeze of the extended winter. Scattered across these fields are clusters of small stone farmhouses, their roofs covered with grass. The extreme isolation is compounded by the difficult conditions. Life is hard but simple, centered on the basic necessities. The villagers herding livestock across the valleys have a rich and varied history that emphasizes their strong Azerbaijani roots. Still, as the snow slowly recedes up the mountains, so too is there an evident thaw in attitudes toward their Armenia neighbors, just across the porous border. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) The main livelihood of people in these two mountainous regions is animal husbandry, something that is presenting difficulties for an increasingly urbanizing population. The newly elected mayor, Nevzat Bozkus, told us that people are moving into the city, such as it is, but know only animal husbandry as a way of life. Consequently, they bring their animals with them into the city -- with negative results for the city sanitation system, the lives of the animals, and the people's ability to live off of them. The provinces are starting to develop industry, but slowly. So far they have a sugar factory which produces for domestic consumption, and a cement factory which exports to Georgia and Azerbaijan. Jobs are a major concern here, as is basic infrastructure. Nevzat, who has a background in electrical engineering, said his priority as Mayor will be city planning, to account for the still rural lifestyle, and infrastructure. In a not-so-subtle reference to the previous mayor, he said "people here need reliable water, garbage collection, and electricity, not grand ideals or festivals. The people know I understand this, and that is why I was elected."

Isolated but Informed

¶3. (C) But despite being largely rural and far from the cities of Turkey (Igdir's nearest airport is two hours away through mountain roads), this an area that does not view itself as information deprived. In Kars alone there are nine local newspapers, and a local Kars television channel, in addition to the national papers and satellite television available. There is also Kafkas University, which began with only one department (Veterinary/Animal Husbandry) but now has expanded to five departments, teaches Georgian, Azeri and Russian, and has students from all around Turkey as well as 30 foreign students from nearby countries. The university continues to grow, recently partnering with SUNY, and

continuing talks with the University of Illinois for cooperation in the veterinary and animal science fields. The rector, Professor Abamuslim Guven, said he would welcome Americans as guest speakers. The university is not without internal difficulties. We met with the president of the Student Association who nervously told us the Association was recently shut down by the administration, and is now facing a court case, due to the actions (apparently pro-Kurdish protests) of some of its Kurdish majority members. He declined to elaborate.

14. (C) The University provides a glimpse of the diversity that lies beneath the ordinary village exterior of the region. The residents come from a variety of backgrounds, both religious and ethnic. The Kars Culture and Arts Association President, Vedat Akcayoz, is also the president of the World Malakans Association, a rare group that left Russia in 1666 in protest against compulsory military service, as their culture and religion are against war and prohibit any military participation. Only 12 members of this group still remain in Turkey. Akcayoz himself has Malakan ancestors, one reason he is trying to preserve the culture and present it to the rest of Turkey and the world. Through his work in the Culture and Arts Association, Vedat said he has numerous ideas for multicultural projects, including projects between Turkey and Armenia, and hopes to find support for them.

15. (C) The largest group in these two provinces is the Azeri-Turks. But it is not considered a separate ethnic group, as evidenced by the oft-heard refrains "two countries, one nation" and "our Azeri brothers." Claims of an Azeri background appear common, although few participate in any Azeri cultural traditions and fewer still have traveled to Azerbaijan. At the Dilucu border gate between Azerbaijan-administered Nakhicevan and Turkey, the head of the facility told us, with great enthusiasm, how much he prefers his work in this remote outpost to his previous assignment near Istanbul at a Greek-Turkish border crossing. Why? "Because we can communicate here. They speak Turkish!" We pointed out that they actually speak Azerbaijani. "Well, yes, but it's the same," he said. "We're the same! They're our brothers!"

Animosity toward Armenia Hard to Find

16. (C) Despite the physical and familial closeness with Azerbaijan, any animosity toward Armenians was hard to find. No one argued to us that Turkey should not move forward with Armenia until the Nagorno-Karabakh problem was resolved. At the ruins of Ani, only a small ravine separates Turkey and Armenia. One can almost touch the farmers on the other side, tending to their herds of cows just like those on the Turkish side of the border. The animals are oblivious to politics, and sometimes cross back and forth across the border. But the people can only look at each other across the divide, across an ancient stone bridge now crumbled with only the remnants of the pillar on each side remaining. Some want to restore the bridge as a gesture of friendship. Another grander gesture of friendship looms from a hilltop in the center of the city of Kars: a stone statue of two figures facing each other, a project of the former mayor, Naif Alibeyoglu, who laments the fact that his term ended before the statue was ever finished.

17. (C) In the neighboring province of Igdir, another large monument stands in the city center. But this one is not of friendship, but rather of three giant swords reaching towards the heavens. These are swords that are a tribute to local Turks who were killed in battle -- by Armenians. There is also a "Turkish Genocide" museum in the town. But despite these monuments, the prevailing sentiments toward Armenia were not overtly hostile. "If Armenia offered one hand, we would offer back ten," said Igdir Governor Saffet Karahisarli. "People here lost family, too. This area has seen much fighting and death. But the people here could forget this. They could move on. But not if Armenia keeps

bringing up the past. They don't want to be told that they are responsible for genocide when they still remember family members who were killed by those accusing them. If you're going to talk about pains of the past, they can't accept the world ignoring their own pain. They would need people to acknowledge their tragedy as well, to honor those they lost."

The Igdir Sub-Governor, a young graduate of Gazi University, said he too supported opening the border, although his reasoning appeared more dismissive: "Who is Armenia, anyway?

A country of 3 million? That's like one city in Turkey. Why should we even care if the doors are open or closed, or what they say about us?"

18. (C) Aside from the genocide issue, most people seem relatively indifferent to the potential border opening. They have more pressing concerns on their mind: the basic quality of life issues that the Kars mayor described, as well as developing their tourism sector, women's employment and education, and preserving the environment. However, Azerbaijan has a consulate here, which is reportedly very active in expressing its strong views against Turkish normalization with Armenia, and also very active in expressing its disapproval about those who might disagree. A group of Turkish businessmen who previously tried to explore options of business opportunities with Armenia said their reputations had been attacked. Former Mayor Naif Alibeyoglu said some people tried to portray his monument as a tribute to Armenia and him as a supporter of Armenia, and this was one reason why he had lost in the recent local election. "It was a monument to all humanity, to human values everywhere, not just to Armenia" he protests.

Comment

19. (C) There appear to be many opportunities for engagement in the area. On relations with Armenia, the "genocide" recognition issue continues to dominate. The linkage with Nagorno-Karabakh seems to be getting minimal traction. Many residents seem to appreciate how they could benefit from an open border. There have been a number of successful Turkish-Armenian joint activities carried out here, and no shortage of willing partners to conduct more. Embassy projects in almost any area -- environmental and women's programs, student outreach, cultural events, business investment, tourism infrastructure development -- would clearly resonate.

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